

# No Idols

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series:  
Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 5:8-10

*Idolatry is the practice of ascribing absolute value to things of relative worth.*

**T**wenty-nine-year-old Taylor Hicks is America's newest idol. He was crowned the fifth American idol on May 29th. Sixty-three million votes were cast in the final episode that vaulted Taylor Hicks over runner-up Katharine McPhee. That's more votes than any president in the history of our country has ever received. Forty-three million viewers watched the grand finale.

What intrigues me is the name of this show—American Idol! Its name originates from the British TV show, Pop Icon. I'm fascinated with the term American Idol, since today's topic focuses on the com-mand about having no idols.

Now, strictly speaking, Taylor Hicks is nobody's idol here today. I surely hope not! Yet there is something in the human heart tempted to give other people, places and things our supreme allegiance.

Idolatry is the practice of ascribing absolute value to things of relative worth. Idolatry worships the creation rather than the Creator.

The first commandment teaches, "You shall have no other gods before me" (5:7). The second commandment drafts off this first command and amplifies it: "You shall not make for yourself an idol whether in the form of anything that is in the heaven above, or that

is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth" (5:8).

Israel's neighbors worshipped a whole pantheon of gods. The Egyptians fashioned animal deities for use in worship. Nations in the ancient Near East paid homage to the sun, moon and stars. Israel wanted to be like other nations. That sounds like something my kids used to say—we want to be like all the other kids. Israel wanted to be like all the other nations.

The Biblical God has voice but no form. Not even Moses was permitted to see God face to face (Exodus 33:20). Now, contrast this Biblical God, who has voice but no form, to these idols who have form but no voice. Jeremiah writes with biting sarcasm, "Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field. They cannot speak; they have to be carried for they cannot walk.... They cannot do any harm; neither can they do any good" (10:5). What good is a god who cannot speak and cannot walk? Would you rather worship a god who has form but no voice or one with voice but no form?

There is a story told about Abraham as a young boy, who was left to look after his father's shop when he was out on business. His father, Terach, sold idols in his shop, so young Abraham decided to take a hammer and smash all the idols, except one, in whose hand he placed the hammer. When Terach

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Came back and saw the destruction, he asked what had happened. Abraham said all the idols got into a fight and only one of them was left standing. His father said this was impossible as idols are only made of clay. Abraham then asked, using his boyhood logic, how could his father worship idols made of clay?

Idols domesticate God. They reduce our timeless, omnipotent God to space and time. While idols are limited, God is limitless. Idols diminish God's transcendence. Perhaps God defies form to preserve His transcendence.

We prefer idols of our own making. We want our gods to like what we like and hate what we hate. We want our gods to be like us. We want handy, convenient gods, whom we can manage and who give us what we want.

But the Biblical God will not be domesticated. God will not share dominion with puny, man-made Gods. God remains limitless and transcendent.

This second command declares, "You shall not bow down or worship them for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God." When you hear the word "jealous," don't think envy, think zealous. Zealous is the way God loves us. God loves us exclusively and expects exclusivity in return. God says, in effect, I'll give you nothing less than all my love, and I expect nothing less than all your devotion.

God's love is often likened in the Bible to marital love. God intends husbands and wives to love each other exclusively. True

married love permits no other suitors and no other rivals.

"You shall not bow to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generations of those who reject me" (Deuteronomy 5:9). This verse requires some interpretation, since it appears, at first glance, to suggest that children are held accountable for their parents' sins. The Bible makes it clear that God holds people accountable for their own sins (Deuteronomy 24:16; Ezekiel 18:1-4).

That said, sin is passed down in families in the same way that virtues are inherited. Scripture tells us plainly that the sins of the fathers (and the mothers) will be visited upon the children. Children inherit positive as well as negative qualities from their parents. These attitudes and behaviors become inculcated in children either as virtues or vices.

God places a statute of limitations on Biblical judgment in this second command. It will be confined to the third and fourth generations, which is a Semitic idiom meaning those who are living. The first generation constitutes great-grandparents, the second generation represents grandparents, the third generation portrays parents and the fourth generation references children. God confines His judgment to those who are living yet confers His grace upon a thousand generations. In other words, God's love is limitless.

We do not worship the same false gods of the ancient Hebrews,

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yet we pledge allegiance today to a host of false values. Ask yourself three questions: How do I spend my time? Where do I spend my money? What do I think about? What occupies our time and dominates our spending habits reveals what we value in life. What we think about when we go to sleep at night and awaken in the morning tells us what we prize.

Chris and I went to the Nationals game Thursday night. What was striking to us wasn't the action on the field but the activity in the stands. Drinking beer doesn't bother me. For the record, my family ran a brewery for a hundred years, so I was raised around beer. What we found disconcerting was the number of young adults downing beer after beer. The four young women seated in front of us, in their early 20s, consumed five beers in a span of five innings. By the seventh inning, it became obvious what was happening—drinking acted as a social lubricant to help people lose their inhibitions about socializing with each other. How many of these same people will rely on alcohol later in life to relax them and help them to talk with each other?

Alcoholism rises to idolatrous proportions in people's lives. We can make an idol out of anything in life: materialism, pleasure, sex, luxury, the worship of self, security, fame, success, even sports.

As a sports fan, I read with interest an article about the religion of sport by a professor of

Religious Studies at Penn State University named Dr. Charles Prebish. He observes that sport provides its followers today with everything that traditional religions provided over the centuries. Prebish writes, "For me, it is not just a parallel that is emerging between sport and religion, but rather a complete identity. Sport is religion for growing numbers of Americans, and this is no product of simply facile reasoning or wishful thinking. Further, for many, sport religion has become a more appropriate expression of personal religiosity than Christianity, Judaism or any of the traditional religions...."

Our stadiums serve as shrines. Our songs and cheers express our devotion. Our prized athletes on the field are revered as beloved icons.

I recall a newspaper article last year about the devotion of Redskins fans. One long-time season ticket holder said, "Being a Redskins fan is truly number one in my life. When I found the Redskins I found a new life." I'd say this person needs to get a life! There is only one thing in this world worthy of such honor and reverence: Jesus Christ!

On this Confirmation Sunday, this commandment strikes me as altogether fitting. There are thousands of people, places and things vying for your affection. But there is only one thing worthy of our worship and affection: Jesus Christ.

There is a tale from ancient India about four brothers who each mastered a special ability. These

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brothers met to reveal what they had learned. “I have mastered a science,” said the first, “by which I can take a bone of some creature and create the flesh that goes with it.” The second brother said, “I know how to grow the creature’s skin and hair if there is flesh on its bones.” The third said, “I am able to create its limbs if I have flesh, the skin and the hair.” The fourth brother said, “I know how to give life to that creature if its form is complete.”

The brothers subsequently went into the jungle to find a bone to demonstrate their specialties. They found a lion’s bone. One brother added flesh, the second grew hide and hair, the third gave it matching limbs and the fourth gave the lion its life. Shaking its mane, the lion sprang to life and killed them all, vanishing contently into the jungle.

We have the capacity to create what can devour us. Goals and dreams can consume us. Possessions and property can destroy us—unless we seek God’s kingdom and His righteousness and allow Him to breathe into what we make of life.

A few years ago, Japanese scientists placed a hundred wooden decoys on the Izu Islands of Japan to attract endangered albatrosses and encourage them to breed. For more than two years, a five-year-old albatross named Deko tried to woo a wooden decoy by building fancy nests and fighting off rival suitors. He spent his days faithfully by her side. One researcher talked about Deko’s

attraction to this wooden decoy: “Deko seems to have no desire to date real birds.”

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